Seven Against Thebes

The Theban myth-cycle begins with the foundation of the city by Cadmus, and ends, seven generations later, with the city's capture by sons of the seven champions of Aeschylus' play. The group of myths favoured by dramatists centres on Cadmus' great-grandson Laius and his children and grandchildren. Brought up in exile, Laius outraged the gods by a homosexual liaison with Chrysippus, prince of Pisa. He fled for his life to Thebes, where he married Queen Jocasta and took the throne. Apollo foretold that he would have a son, who would kill his father and murder his mother. To prevent this, Laius exposed the newborn child on Mount Cithaeron.

The events which followed are known to modern audiences chiefly from Sophocles' *King Oedipus*: the rescuing of the child Oedipus, his visit to the Delphic oracle, his murder of Laius, his encounter with the Sphinx, his marriage to Jocasta, and the punishment he inflicted on himself when he discovered the truth. As the myth (though not Sophocles) continues, he lived on afterwards in Thebes, until his sons Eteocles and Polynices served him a slave's portion of food instead of the royal prerogative. He cursed them, saying that iron would divide their inheritance, and they would go to the Underworld on the same day, killed by one another. He then went into exile, led by his daughter Antigone, and some time later died.

Eteocles and Polynices both claimed the throne of Thebes. When Eteocles won, Polynices asked King Adrastus of Argos to raise an army and support his claim. Seven champions led the Argive army: Adrastus, Polynices, Tydeus, Capaneus, Hippomedon, Amphiaraus and Parthenopaeus. They attacked Thebes, each leading his men against one of the city's seven gates, where he was challenged by a Theban champion. At the seventh gate, Eteocles and Polynices met in single combat, and each killed the other. Once again, the events which followed – King Creon's order that the defenders should be buried with honour but the attackers left to rot; Antigone's defiance and death – are well known from Sophocles. The myth-cycle ends by telling how these events outraged all Greece, how Theseus attacked the city, executed Creon and buried the dead, and how a second group of champions, sons of the original seven, besieged the city but found it empty: all the inhabitants, warned by Tiresias (who all through these events had given infallible prophecies) that the gods would no longer protect them, had fled.

In 467BC Aeschylus won first prize with a quartet of plays on this cycle: the tragedies *Laius*, *Oedipus* and *Seven Against Thebes* and the satyr-play *Sphinx*. Only *Seven Against Thebes* survives. Though little is known about the missing plays, it seems reasonable that their titles suggest their contents, and that the tragedies formed a trilogy. *Seven Against Thebes* is therefore even more of a torso than *Suppliants* or *Prometheus Bound* (both of which came first, not last, in groups of plays). Its difficulties, for scholars, are compounded by the fact that a new ending appears to have been added some time after 467, introducing the characters of Antigone and Ismene (whose story is not otherwise mentioned) and probably not by Aeschylus. Textual problems have earned the play a reputation as both unsatisfactory and difficult.

As we read *Seven Against Thebes*, however, or see it in the theatre, such criticisms fade away. The play is an all-engulfing torrent of language (almost certainly paralleled in the original production by music and dance). It is, so to speak, in three 'movements', the Chorus-led laments of the first and last thirds framing the actor-led pomp and martial ceremony of the central description of the champions. Some

writers scorn the idea that Greek tragedy in performance might be more like modern oratorio or cantata. If it is an inadequate way to 'realise' most surviving plays onstage, *Seven Against Thebes* is the exception. There is no action at all apart from half a dozen inessential exits and entrances. There is no philosophical discussion: the issues are straightforward and are presented head-on, especially by Eteocles. There is no forward movement: Aeschylus neither leads up to the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices, making them a climax, nor falls back from them afterwards (as he does, for example, with the death of Clytemnestra in *Libation-Bearers* or the acquittal of Orestes in *Eumenides*). The deaths take their place in a sequence of events which are, dramatically speaking, as static and unvaried as tableaux in a tapestry or the movements of a symphony.

Comparisons with music go further than mere form. Each of the play's three sections is a sequence of statements and responses, the response in each case 'closing' and 'confirming' the thought broached in the statement. (This is akin to the 'open/close' structure of many themes in classical music, for example those of Mozart or early Beethoven.) There is constant repetition of ideas, either by complete statement or in fragmentary allusion. Longer speeches, or passages in new metres, punctuate the flow, shifting the direction or pace of thought. The central section is more static, less varied, than the 'movements' on either side. (In modern productions, with a female Chorus, the outer and central sections even offer different voice-timbres; one wonders if this was paralelled – and if so, how – in the original, all male, Greek production.) Most striking of all, the 'thematic' construction of the play does not depend only on such large matters as the contrast between the Chorus' panic and Eteocles' impatience at the beginning, or between the Soldier's description of each of the seven champions and Eteocles' measured but no less high-flown response. Woven into the texture, like the small details of harmony or scoring which give life to a musical score, are fragmented, allusive, many-times-repeated flickers of ideas. The curse on the house of Laius and the Fury which oversees it; Eteocles' (unexplained, unexamined) disgust for the female sex (echoing the family curse); the sounds of war –

none of these are described or debated at length (as the curse on the house of Atreus is in the *Oresteia*, or the arrogance of power is in *Prometheus Bound*); instead they are slipped regularly into our minds, often by single words or phrases, colouring the main themes and utterances of the play.

Cerebral analysis of this kind is perhaps more likely to occur to readers of the text than to spectators in the theatre. As one watches the play, however, one is unlikely to miss overall changes of mood and tempo, patterns of statement and response, and the many incidental effects, both large (for example the grand, relaxed 'settling in' to such passages as that beginning 'Gods of Thebes, come, come gods of this land', 109ff) and small (the 'night sky' on Tydeus' shield, 389ff; the muzzle-pipes, 467; the dead stop after 'Polynices, your own brother', 632; the 'flags of doom' in 958, turning in on itself the prancing battle-imagery from earlier in the play). Aeschylus' poetry in this play matches his best surviving work: the early choruses of *Agamemnon*, say, or Prometheus' description of Io's wanderings, or the Egyptian scene in *Suppliants*. All such excellence would be immediately apparent to an audience – indeed, more obvious in performance than to someone merely reading the text. And Aeschylus, showman as well as poet, added another ingredient, whose effect is lost today but must have electrified his contemporaries. In 467, when *Seven Against Thebes* was performed, memories of the Persian invasion of 13 years before, of the devastation wrought by war, would still be raw, both adding poignancy to the choral laments of the play and pointing up the militaristic bombast of the Soldier's descriptions of the seven champions. Aeschylus flaunted no victory at Salamis here (as he did in *Persians*), offered no praise, overt or covert, for Athens' gods, leaders or fighting men. An artist chooses what best fits each occasion – and the resonances Aeschylus provided in this play were not only appropriate to the end of his treatment of the doomed house of Laius, the dying fall of Thebes, but must have had an unexpected political relevance – no less pungent for being unstated – at the time.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Characters

ETEOCLES, KING OF THEBES
SOLDIER
MESSENGER
ANTIGONE
ISMENE
HERALD
CHORUS OF WOMEN OF THEBES
POLYNICES
CITIZENS, SOLDIERS (silent parts)

In front of the palace doors of Thebes. A group of CITIZENS *is waiting for news.*[17] *Enter* ETEOCLES.

ETEOCLES.

People of Thebes, the hour of fate is now.
I am your helmsman – this hand to guide
The state, these eyes that never rest.
If things go well, thanks be to the gods.
If they go ill (which heaven forbid),
One man will be blamed, one name
Muttered in the city, cursed with groans.
Eteocles. My name. Zeus Protector,
Fulfil your name, protect us now.
I speak to you all:
Those in the dawn of youth, those whose day is done.
A vital shoot grows in each one of you,
A sapling of strength. Cherish it!
Be strong for the city and its gods,
Respect for them is not to die;
Be strong for your children;
For this earth of Thebes,
The nurse who cradled you,
Bore all the burdens of your growing-time,
Reared you to live in her, to fight,
Be strong for her now. She needs your strength.

So far Zeus has tipped the scales our way.
A long siege, the enemy always at the walls –
And the god is with us, so far.
Now Tiresias, our prophet, speaks:
Infallible shepherd of the birds,
Who hears, who tells their omens –
No need of sacrificial flame.
Thus, now, he hears, he warns:
Night-councils in the enemy –
They plan a huge attack, a final thrust.

Man the battlements, the entrances. Hurry.
Arm yourselves. Swarm the walkways full,
The scaffolding towers, the gates. Be brave,
Stand firm, face all that foreign horde.
God will give us victory. My spies are out

To track their army – and not in vain:
Their skill my warrant against surprise.

Enter SOLDIER.

SOLDIER.
Eteocles, captain of Thebes,
News of the enemy I bring. Clear news,
First hand news: I saw it for myself.

Seven men, warlords, slit a bull's throat,
Caught its blood in a black-rimmed shield,
Dabbled common fingers and swore an oath–
To Ares the wargod, bloodthirsty Fear and Rout –
Either to smash this city and trample it
Or paddle our soil with their dying blood.
Keepsakes they left for their parents at home,
Hung on Adrastus' chariot. Tears they wept,
Yet made no sound of grief. Hearts of iron,
Courage blazing, war-glow in lion eyes.
Confirmation treads on the heels of news:
I left them casting lots how each
Should lead his men against your gates.

Our best, our bravest – quickly
Set them against the gates. Even as I speak
The Argive army moves nearer, nearer:
A dustcloud, flecked foam from horses' lungs.
Helmsman, use your skill. Reef in your town.
The storm of Ares blows:
Waves of soldiers swirl and roar.
Snatch the moment now.
For me, count on me:
Unsleeping eyes, true tongue,
A fence of news.
I'll keep true watch.

Exit.

ETEOCLES.
Zeus! Mother Earth! Gods of Thebes!

Rabid Fury of Oedipus my father,
Spare my city. Never root her up,
Topple, trample her in death.
Our homes, our shrines – we're Greeks,
Free people, Cadmus' children:
Never cast us down in chains.
To arms! To arms! Your cause and ours I plead:
No prosperous state forgets the gods.

Enter CHORUS, *in disorder.*[18]

CHORUS.
Squeal terror, looming fear.
It's loosed, the army. Out of camp.
A flood, a dust-swarm,
Marching, galloping. See it! See it!
Tongueless messenger, it tells no lie.
On the plain, our plain, a pulse
A breath of arms.
It's coming, it's coming.
It skims, it flies.
Torrent in mountain gorge.

Yoh! Yoh!
Gods, goddesses, it rears,
Evil, turn it aside.
O-ah!
It hurls on the walls.
Surging shields, dazzling,
White shields pound Thebes.
Which god, which goddess?
Who our champion?
Whose altars? Where kneel?
Yoh! Blessed ones, do you hear?

Grab images. Cling.
Cling. Don't wait and howl.
Hear them! Shield-rattle. Hear!
Robe the statues,
Crown them now.
I'm afraid. Spear cracks on spear.
Up, Ares! Wargod, Ares, up!

Ancient ally, help us now.
Gold-helmet-god, look down, look down.
You loved us so.

Gods of Thebes come, come gods of this land.
We beg you, your faithful ones,
Let us not be slaves.
A wave of men, plumed men,
Breath of the wargod roars on Thebes.
Zeus father, all-powerful,
Snatch vile hands away.
The Argives, a ring of men,
War-weapons, terrible.
Bits in horses' teeth
Chink death, chink death.
Seven warlords, captains of men,
With spears and armour stand,
Each gallant at his gate.

Pallas Athene, seed of Zeus,
Whose glory is battle, protect us!
Poseidon, sealord, charioteer,
Trident-bearer, snatch our fear.
Ares, show yourself,
Protect us, cherish us:
We're yours, we're yours.
Aphrodite, mother of Thebes,
Help us, blood of your blood:
We cling to you,
Our prayers are right, are right.
Wolf-Apollo, be a wolf to them,
Savage them. Artemis,
Daughter of Leto, huntress,
Draw now your bow.

E! E! E! E![19]
Squeal of chariots round Thebes I hear.
Hera, queen of heaven.
Tormented axles scream.
Artemis, beloved.
Mad sky, bristling spears.

What will it suffer, our city? What will happen?
What end do the gods demand?

E! E! E! E!
Stones shower on our battlements.
Beloved Apollo,
Bronze shields pound gates.
Son of Zeus, send
Consummation, blessed end of war.
Athene, guardian of Thebes, stand close, protect
Your home, the seven gates.

Yoh! Powerful ones,
Gods, goddesses,
On sentry-go for Thebes,
Spear-sick city, betray it not
To a babble of enemies.
Hear us, in justice hear us,
Our prayers, our hands outstretched.

Yoh! Powers beloved,
Deliverers, straddle Thebes,
Show your love for Thebes.
Rich rites you had of us,
Feasts of prayer, of sacrifice–
Remember them! Remember
And help us now.

ETEOCLES.
Intolerable! Vile creatures!
Is this how you help the city?
Is this the heart you give our men?
Grovelling at images, howling, shrieking,
Outraging decency! Good times or bad,
Who'd live with women?
On top, they're unendurable; done down,
They pull the town around their ears.
Our soldiers, look! Scream panic in every street,
You rip the heart from them. Out there
Our enemies laugh; inside we destroy ourselves.
Live with women, that's the price you pay.
Obedience I demand from everyone:

Man, woman, child. Those who disobey
Will be sentenced and stoned.
Death; no reprieve.
Affairs of state – men's work! We want
No women here. Go in, do no more harm.
D'you hear me? Go in! Go in!

CHORUS LEADER.
Dear son of Oedipus, we're afraid.
Scrape, squeal of chariots we hear,
Whistle of wheels, twang of bits,
Iron bridles singing in horses' mouths.

ETEOCLES.
Do sailors leave their watch
And huddle in the hold
When ships labour in rolling sea?

CHORUS LEADER.
We scrambled to the gods, the old powers,
The images. Hailstorm of rocks
Against the gates. Up, up we ran. Afraid.
To the blessed ones, to beg their help.

ETEOCLES.
Stout walls to blunt Argive spears –
That's the gods' concern. They say:
When a city's captured, its gods abandon it.

CHORUS LEADER.
May I never live to see
Our company of gods desert,
The enemy swarm in our streets,
Burning, destroying.

ETEOCLES.
Pray if you will. But remember:
Obedience is mother to Success,
Salvation's consort. People say.

CHORUS LEADER.
People say. But the gods' power
Stands over all. In troubled times,

Hard pain, look up to the gods –
The dark clouds lift.

ETEOCLES.
Men's work to sacrifice, consult
The gods, when the enemy's at the gates.
Women, keep quiet and stay inside.

CHORUS LEADER.
Thanks to the gods we live in a city
Unbeaten still. Our walls hold enemies at bay.
Will your anger deny us that?

ETEOCLES.
Honour the gods; that I'll not deny.
But calmly, without panic:
You sow terror in our fighting men.

CHORUS LEADER.
Unheard-of sounds. Discordant prattle.
We fled in fear
To the holy place, to pray.

ETEOCLES.
Men will die, be wounded, and you
Will hear of it. But never snatch
At the news with shrieks.
For it is common: Ares the wargod
Feasts on mortals, laps their blood.

CHORUS LEADER.
Horses neighing. I hear them!

ETEOCLES.
Hear quietly, if hear you must.

CHORUS LEADER.
Earth groans, walls groan. They're everywhere!

ETEOCLES.
I'll deal with them.

CHORUS LEADER.
Noise at the gates!

ETEOCLES.
Don't blab to all the town.

CHORUS LEADER.
Gods of Thebes, crowd now!

ETEOCLES.
Damn you, be quiet! Have done!

CHORUS LEADER.
Gods of Thebes, don't make us slaves.

ETEOCLES.
You make us slaves: yourselves and all of us.

CHORUS LEADER.
Almighty Zeus, shoot our enemies down.

ETEOCLES.
Zeus: women! What a gift you gave!

CHORUS LEADER.
We suffer like men when the city falls.

ETEOCLES.
Parade gods' images, and speak such words?

CHORUS LEADER.
Fear! Fear! Terror trips my tongue.

ETEOCLES.
Do as I say. One favour. Now.

CHORUS LEADER.
What favour?

ETEOCLES.
Have done. Suffer in silence.
Don't panic those you love.

CHORUS LEADER.
No more words.
Like the rest, I'll bow to fate.

ETEOCLES.
That's better. The omen in these words I take.

Now, leave the images. Pray for help,
For the gods to march with us.
Take your words from me. Sing hymns
Of hope, of sacrifice. Greek ritual.
Put heart in those we love; dissolve their fear.

Guardians of Thebes,
Gods of farmland and marketplace,
River-spirits of Dirce and Ismenus,
To you these prayers.
When victory is ours, when our city's safe,
Your altars will stream with sacrifice.
Sheep, oxen,
Trophies, spoils of the enemy;
Their tattered armour will scab your shrines.

Make these your prayers. No tears,
No snorts and grunts. Fate is fate:
You'll not shriek free of it.

I'll choose six men, myself the seventh,
And station them against the enemy:
Seven champions, each at his gate.
This now. I need no messengers,
No torrent of words to fire my heart.

Exit.

CHORUS.
He speaks; but my mind is on guard for fear.
Dread tenants my soul,
Flickering terror
Of the army that rings the town.
So do timid doves
For their nestlings' sake
Tremble at snakes,
Death wreathed in the nest.
They crowd against our walls,
A horde, numberless, a shoal.
What will become of us?
Jagged rocks they hurl,
Hurl on our men.

Gods, children of Zeus,
Stretch out,
Save our city, our army,
For Thebes be strong.
What better place on Earth will you make your own
If you surrender to our enemies
The loam of Thebes,
Our river-water,
Purest of all Poseidon,
Earth-girdler, pours
For mortals to drink?
Gods of our city, stand firm for Thebes.
On the army outside its walls
Rain havoc,
Mutilation, death,
Let them drop their arms and run.
So honour will be ours –
And you? Warriors,
Deliverers, we'll name you then.
Set firm your thrones,
Hear these shrill prayers.

Cause for tears! A city old as time
Packed off to death before it's due.
Spear-spoils, slaves, flakes of ash
Crumbled by fellow-Greeks
While the gods stand by. Unjust!
Its women, its girls, led away,
E! E!, women and girls
Like ponies dragged by the hair,
Clutching their rags.
Tears choke in echoing streets,
Empty tears of a people lost.
I shudder at heavy fate.

Cause for grief! Young girls,
Buds of new womanhood unplucked,
Tread paths of bitterness. Slaves!
I say the dead are happier,

Happier far the dead.
For when men break a city,
E! E!, sharp sorrow bites.
Plunder, murder,
Fire-foulness, stench of smoke:
Ares the wargod
Pants madness, pants blood,
Smears every shrine with death.

Noise bubbles in the town.
The tower-net tears.
Spears tussle,
Man locks with man.
Babies newborn
Suck blood for milk
And wail and wail.
Brothers in plunder
The sackers come:
Full hand calls to full,
Empty to empty hand.
They squabble, they fight;
Each wants more, wants most –
Who can tell the end of it?

Litter of food, stores spilled,
Strewn on the ground:
Wives, weep your tears.
Earth's bounty
Trampled, lost.
Slave-girls, new slaves,
New misery, must bed
With new masters now:
The conquerors
Possess their enemies.
Is there hope?
Will the consummation of night
Soothe their sorrow,
Bring comfort in their pain?

CHORUS LEADER.
Look! A soldier. News of the army.

He's hurrying, forcing his legs to run.
Lord Eteocles too, running,
Running to hear the news.

Enter ETEOCLES *and* SOLDIER.

SOLDIER.
I can tell you the exact position of the enemy,
Which champion has drawn which gate by lot.
Tydeus at the Proïtis Gate fumes and waits.
Unfavourable omens –
The priest forbids him cross the river yet.
He's on tiptoe with eagerness, mad to fight,
Like a sunstruck snake, hissing, spitting insults.
'So wise,' he snarls at the priest,
'And gutless! Afraid to fight!'
So he shouts, and shakes his helmet crests,
Three crests, a shadow-mane.
Bronze tassels on his armour rattle terror.
On his shield-front this arrogant device:
A sky blazing stars, and on the boss the Moon,
Queen of heaven, glittering, eye of night.
Delirious with arrogance, puffed with arms,
He roars his battle-hunger on the banks,
A racehorse at the starting-line, snorting at the bit,
Rearing at the trumpet call. So Tydeus.
Who'll face him? When the bolts shoot back
At the Proïtis Gate, which champion stands for Thebes?

ETEOCLES.
No man's armour frightens me.
Designs on shields break no man's bones;
Tassels and helmet-crests don't bite,
Don't carry spears. This night-sky you speak of,
Painted on his shield, a glitter of stars –
Foolishness, an omen for the man himself.
His night, his own eyes dark in death –
A just end to his arrogance,
Insolent boasting that bites itself.
Against Tydeus, the champion I choose

Is Melanippus son of Astacus. A noble lord,
Servant of modesty, enemy of arrogance.
Shrinks only from evil; brave of the brave.
When Cadmus sowed the dragon-seed in Thebes,[20]
And men grew – he's of that proud stock,
Melanippus of Thebes. The outcome
Is in Ares' hands, a throw of dice:
But Justice, blood of his blood,
Arms Melanippus to fight for his city now.

CHORUS LEADER.
Gods, give him victory, our champion.
Justly he fights for Thebes.
Let us never see their blood,
Never see them die for those they love.

SOLDIER.
May the gods grant Melanippus victory.
The second gate, Electra's, was drawn by Capaneus.
A man-monster, worse than the last.
Bloated with arrogance, huge threats
Against the walls – fate cancel them!
God willing or unwilling he'll topple Thebes,
He says, fall Zeus's anger where it will.
Lightning? Thunder? He'll bask in them,
He says, like sunshine after noon.
His emblem: an unarmed man, fire-bringer,
A blazing torch held high.
His motto in gold, 'I'll burn the town'.
Who'll challenge such a man?
Who'll hear his threats and never flinch?

ETEOCLES.
Huffing and puffing: the gain is ours.
You'll see: balloons of boasts
The truth soon pricks, the true tongue tells.
Capaneus threatens deeds, not words alone:
He mocks the gods, sends mortal tongue
Vaulting to heaven, waves of words
To spatter on Zeus. Firebringer!
A thunderbolt will bring him fire,

And nothing like the sun in afternoon.
I set against this blabberer
Lord Polyphontes – a man of fire and strength,
Breastplate of Thebes, champion of Artemis
The Protector and other gods.
Name the next gate, and the man they chose for it.

CHORUS LEADER.

Death to the boaster who threatened Thebes!
Send down thunder to stop him dead
Before he breaks in with spear erect
To ravish and pillage my maiden store.[21]

SOLDIER.

Etyoclus was next. From the hammered helmet
The third lot fell to him.
He'll hurl his soldiers at the Neïs Gate.
Eager horses, snorting at the bit,
He'll wheel for the attack.
On their cheek-pieces, muzzle-pipes
Play shrill proud music, the breath of war.
On his shield, no mean device he bears:
An armed man on a ladder climbs
The enemy's walls, to tear their town.
His motto, his warcry's written there:
'Not Ares himself can throw me down.'
Against him send a champion
Fit to keep slavery's yoke from Thebes.

ETEOCLES.

I'll send Megareus, Creon's son,
Of the dragon-seed. Good luck attend him.
His hands are his boasts: they'll talk for him.
Wild horses! Let them trample the air with neighing,
He'll not flinch from his gate. Either he'll die,
Return to the earth that grew his seed,
Or else he'll take them both, live man
And painted man, with the city on the shield –
A fine trophy to hang in his father's house.
Who was next to brag?

CHORUS LEADER.
Good luck go with him, champion of Thebes,
Disaster for his enemies. With boasts they come,
Strutting their craziness against our town.
See them, Zeus! Judge of all, rage now.

SOLDIER.
At the fourth gate, close by Athene's temple,
Hippomedon's vast bulk stands roaring.
His shield's a sun and moon, a threshing-floor:
When he whirled it round,
My hair stood on end for fear.
The device? A giant breathing fire
And fire's dark brother smoke.
On the rim, a tangle of snakes
Twisting, writhing, rivets the framework fast.
He roars his warcry; he's possessed with war,
A dervish, drunk for death.
No easy task, to tackle such a man:
Terror personificd, baying at the gate.

ETEOCLES.
Athene will see to it, who lives beside the gate.
She'll scorn his boasts; she'll drive him off,
This snake that threatens chicks and nest.
And then Hyperbius, Oenops' brave son,
I'll send against him. Man for man –
He'll take any risk, put his fate to any test:
A fine man, his courage and force of arms
Unquestioned. They're matched, the two of them:
Personal enemies, and on their shields
Their gods as well are enemies. Firebreathing giant
Is matched with Zeus enthroned, the Father,
Thunderbolt flaring in his hand.
Invincible, Zeus champions our champion.
So the gods stand on either side. An omen –
Zeus conquers giant, our man beats theirs.

CHORUS LEADER.
So may it be! On his shield he bears
Zeus' enemy, Earth-monster,

Bugbear to mortals and gods alike.
Against our gates may he smash his skull!

SOLDIER.

May it be so. Now I tell the fifth, the one
Allotted to the fifth, the Northern Gate,
Hard by Amphion's tomb, the son of Zeus.
He waves a spear and swears by it.
Calls it beloved, more precious,
More reliable than God. He waves it and swears
He'll stamp Thebes down in spite of Zeus.
So talks this cub of a mountain mother,
So handsome! Halfway to a man.
Down furs his cheeks: close curls, spring blooms.
Proud heart, man's heart, grim gorgon-eyes.
Parthenopaeus the Arcadian,
Spear-friend of our enemies,
Repays his debt to them with threats on us.
His very shield brags, insults our walls –
Full-length, moulded to protect his body,
Its emblem the Sphinx that ate men raw,
Beaten in bronze, riveted in place.
In her claws a Theban, her prey –
An insult that earns him every spear in Thebes.
Wholesaler of death, he'll give no change:
Parthenopaeus the Arcadian,
Stranger reared in Argos,
Who vows to pay the price in Theban blood.
God reject his prayers!

ETEOCLES.

God turn their boasts, their insults,
Against themselves.
Deal evil, pain and death.
For this one too, this Arcadian,
We have a man. A quiet man – deeds not words:
Aktor. His actions speak.
Brother of him I mentioned last.
He'll not let such a flow of deedless words
Babble its way inside our gates;
He'll stop that scorpion Sphinx,

Turn it on itself,
Stamp it dead outside the walls.
God grant these words, this omen.

CHORUS LEADER.
Their words stab my heart.
My hair stands on end.
They blaspheme, they brag!
O gods, oh gods,
Cut them down,
Kill them for all to see.

SOLDIER.
Sixth I name an honest man. No braggart:
A brave man, a priest. Lord Amphiaraus.
He's stationed at the Homoloian Gate.
Lord Tydeus he accuses,
Calls him murderer, mischief-maker,
Evil genius of Argos, mouthpiece of hell,
Death's minister, who led Adrastus on
To this madness, this insensate war.
Another name he tosses in the air: Polynices,
Lord Polynices, your brother. Again and again
He names him: portent of death.
This is what he says: 'A fine thing, dear to the gods,
Glorious forever on mortal tongues:
Pick up an army, out of town,
And hurl it at your country, your country's gods!
Clear water, your motherland – what right have you
To dam it dry? Your people, put to the sword –
How do they advance your cause? For my part,
I mean to enrich this land: my tomb, my oracle
Will fatten it forever. Come! Fight!
I'll die with honour, if die I must.'
So says the priest. His shield held firm.
No emblem he carries: he proclaims
His honour in what he does.
His mind is a fertile field,
Its crop good counsel, common sense.
Pick well his adversary: a brave man, wise.
Respect for the gods gives him authority.

ETEOCLES.
A bitter chance it is in human life
That couples honest men with criminals.
Whatever the enterprise, there's nothing worse
Than bad companions, dead sea fruit.
The sower folly, the harvest death.
When an honest man
Takes passage with pirates,
God drowns them all, good and bad alike.
Just you may be, but live in a state
That fights its neighbours, forgets the gods –
You're caught in the self-same snare,
The gods scourge all alike.
So this priest now, Amphiaraus –
Wise, godfearing, just,
Gifted with prophecy – couples himself
(Commonsense or not) with loudmouthed, godless men.
There's no return: he treads a long road down;
He'll fall, be crushed. The will of Zeus.
I think he'll not attack his gate.
Not from cowardice, faintheartedness,
But because he knows his end, his death
In this battle, if Apollo's words bear fruit –
And when Apollo speaks, his words are true.
Nevertheless, against Amphiaraus I send
Lord Lasthenes, a surly gatekeeper,
Old in wisdom, in sinew young,
Keeneyed, swift to hurl his spear
In the instant his enemy drops his guard.
For mortals, God alone grants victory.

CHORUS LEADER.
O gods, our prayers are lawful.
Grant them,
Grant victory to Thebes, and turn
On our enemies the scythe of war.
Zeus, strike them down outside our walls!

SOLDIER.
Now I'll tell the seventh, at the seventh gate.

Polynices, your own brother.
Curses and death he calls on us.
He swears he'll mount the walls,
Thebes' conqueror proclaimed; he'll chant
His war-whoop, his victory-cry; hand to hand,
Death for death, he'll lock with you –
And if you live, he'll banish you,
Smear you with exile as you dishonoured him.
He calls to witness
Gods of your family, gods of your native land.
So the warlord crows.

His shield's brand new – a circle,
Two figures embossed in gold:
A man in armour, a woman leading him
Calmly, modestly. The motto reads, 'Justice I am. I bring this exile home
To the city and palace that are his by right.'

Now you know all their purposes.
My report is accurate.
Helmsman, it's for you to choose.
What man will you send? You must decide.

Exit.

ETEOCLES.
Cursed house of Oedipus, house of tears,
Possessed, abomination of gods,
My father's curse now blooms in me.
No tears! No tears, for fear
They spawn worse suffering still.
And for Polynices, prince of strife –
Will the motto on his shield speak true?
Will the golden goddess bring him home?
He babbles; he's insane. If Justice,
Virgin daughter of Zeus, had ever lain
In his heart or hand, this might have been.
But never once did she smile on what he did:
From the moment he slipped from his mother's dark womb
Through all his childhood, his growing up,
Till the beard of manhood thickened on his chin,

Not once did Justice acknowledge him. And now
He plots rape on Thebes. If Justice stands by,
Says yes to this madness, she denies her name.
So I believe.
I'll face the man myself.
Prince against prince, brother against brother,
Enemy against enemy – who has more right than I?
My armour, quickly, to save me from spear and stone.

CHORUS LEADER.
No! Dear lord, son of Oedipus,
Don't share his loudness, his craziness.
It's enough that men of Thebes
Lock with the enemy: that guilt
Can be washed away. But brother's blood!
Shed that, pollution never fades.

ETEOCLES.
Evil endured without dishonour –
Our only comfort once we're dead.
For who'll praise evil and dishonour mixed?

CHORUS LEADER.
Such haste, my child! Spear-lust,
Whirlwinds of eagerness gorge your mind.
Abort them, end them now.

ETEOCLES.
Whirlwind of the gods, house of Oedipus
Full sail on the sea of death,
Apollo's curse. Ride on! Ride on!

CHORUS LEADER.
Sharp hunger bites you:
Bitter banquet, human flesh,
Forbidden blood.

ETEOCLES.
Black curse of Oedipus beloved
Haunts my eyes that will not weep,
Whispers victory and death.

CHORUS LEADER.
Pay no heed to it! Live as best you can –
What blame in that? Make sacrifice:
That black-cloaked Fury will fly away.

ETEOCLES.
The gods have turned from us. One sacrifice,
One only, will please them now: our death.
Our future's death – can it be fawned away?

CHORUS LEADER.
Still there's time. Even now
The storm of heaven can rage
More gently. Now it blows full force –

ETEOCLES.
– stirred up by the curse of Oedipus.
I dream prophetic dreams:
They parcel and divide my father's state.

CHORUS LEADER.
This once, accept a woman's words.

ETEOCLES.
Say what you'd have me do.

CHORUS LEADER.
Don't go to the gate. Don't walk that road.

ETEOCLES.
I'm sharp: don't blunt me now.

CHORUS LEADER.
Give way. The gods approve.

ETEOCLES.
These are no words for soldier's ears.

CHORUS LEADER.
You'd harvest your brother's blood?

ETEOCLES.
God gives us evil: there is no escape.

Exit.

CHORUS.

I tremble for fear. There is
A Fury, kin to no other power,
Who feeds on a father's curse.
A bird of death, brooding,
Infallible, death to the house.
Oedipus' raving she'll bring to pass;
Hatred spur son to murder son.

A stranger allots them land.
A harsh judge from the East
Carves all their goods for them.
He's iron, sharp-hearted iron.
Iron plunders their land,
Their wide land, and gives to each
One slice, one narrow grave.

When they die at each other's hand,
When dust gulps blood,
Their black congealing blood,
Whose then the ritual,
Whose cleansing hand
To wash them clean?
New evils in the house
Share tenancy with old.

Old disobedience I tell,
Its punishment swift and long –
Three generations long.
Apollo spoke, and Laius disobeyed.
Three warnings Apollo gave,
Three warnings from the shrine:
'If you would see Thebes live,
Then childless must you die.'

Unthinking Laius with lust
Sowed seed of death:
Oedipus, father-killer,
Who ploughed the furrow
Where he himself was sown.
Harvest of blood he sowed,
Coupled in madness,
Bride and groom in rut.

Waves of disaster fall.
They swell, roar, crash
Hard on the city's hull:
Thin hull,
Defence no wider than a wall.
I tremble at it.
The kings are foundering –
Must Thebes drown too?

A curse made long ago falls due,
And must be paid. Disaster sees
If people are poor, and passes by.
But the rich, grown sleek and fat,
Must empty the warehouse, pay all they have.

What king was ever so admired
By gods, by fellow-citizens,
By the thronging human race,
As Oedipus, that day he killed
The Sphinx who preyed on flesh?

But when he knew at last
His marriage, horror, pain it was.
In misery, in craziness,
He did two evils. First
With his own hand, his father-slaying hand,
He took a pin and ripped his eyes,
More to him than his sons.

When his own disowned him then,
He cursed them with savage words:
That one day they would take a sword
And split their inheritance.
Now I tremble. A Fury is upon us,
Swift Fury, to see it come to pass.

Enter MESSENGER.[22]

MESSENGER.
Happiness, daughters of your mothers nursed!
The threat of slavery is gone; chap-fallen
The boasts of those mighty men.

We ride at anchor; in all that storm
We let no water in. Thebes' walls,
Its fence of fighting men, stood firm.
At six of the seven gates, all's well.
At the seventh, Apollo lord of sevens
Took command; on Oedipus' sons he brought
Full circle Laius' old foolishness.

CHORUS LEADER.
What's happened? More misery for Thebes?

MESSENGER.
Thebes is safe. But the royal brothers –

CHORUS LEADER.
Aiee! My prophetic heart!

MESSENGER.
Dead: each at the other's hand,
Squandered by destiny that haunts this house.
My news is happiness and tears:
Happiness for Thebes restored, tears for its princes
Storm-tossed by their father's curse.
They took a sword hammered from Scythian iron
And split their inheritance. The land
Is theirs. They lie in it: it sops their blood.

Exit.

CHORUS.
Great Zeus, protecting power
Who stands sentry on the walls of Thebes,
Are we to sing
Songs of thanksgiving, hymns of victory,
Or funeral songs
For our war-commanders dead,
Unhappy princes, last of their line?
True to their names they died –
'True glory', 'Much strife' –
Broke heaven's law and died.

Dark destiny, curse fulfilled
For the house of Oedipus.

Ice grips my heart.
I sing them songs of sorrow,
Unhappy brothers,
Bleeding, dying.
A bird of death
Hangs raucous above the spears.

Firm stood the oracle,
Unshaken to the end.
Laius defied it, and still it stands.
I am troubled for Thebes:
God's knife is whetted still.
Brothers of sorrow, you did it,
The unheard-of deed you did.
For pity! It's true, no lie.

Soldiers bring in the bodies of ETEOCLES *and* POLYNICES.

Evidence is here. The messenger spoke truth.
The princes: twinned in anguish,
In suffering, in death.
Each killer, each killed.
What words?
Sorrow on sorrow strikes,
Grief tenants the house.

Dear friends, on winds of sighs,
With oarstrokes of hands now send them home,
Black-sailed barge on the river of dark,
To a sunless jetty,
The secret rooms of death.

ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE *follow the corpses*.[23]

Look: Antigone, Ismene.
A bitter task is theirs,
Bitter tears for brothers slain.
Soon lovely breasts will swell
With weeping, true tears of grief.
First, we must chant
Threnodies of doom,
Foul triumph-songs of death.

Grief-brothered you are,
Most brothered in death of all
Who wear royalty's robes.
I weep: tears unfeigning,
Cries of sorrow that tear the heart.

Stubborn, unyielding,
You pushed to the bitter end,
Sliced with spears your father's house,
A grievous ill.

Grievous men, grievous death,
House sheared apart.

Toppled walls,
Thrones of bitterness you saw.
Cold iron your arbiter –
Your quarrel's done.

Your father's curse fulfilled,
The Fury reared and struck.

Pierced to the heart,
Brother's heart by brother pierced.
Weep for minds possessed,
Weep for the curse,
Blood matched with blood.

Pierced to the heart,
House and brothers pierced
By rage unspeakable,
Accursed; brothers united
In their father's curse.

Tears in the city:
Walls weep, earth weeps
For the men it loved.
For those who come after
Their inheritance waits:
The throne they fought for,
The throne that brought them death.

Their inheritance!
Sharp-hearted in their pride
They divided it,
Iron their arbiter.
'Unjust!' we say
Who loved them once,
Hearts bitter at the god of war.

Cut with iron they lie.
Cut with iron
There waits for them – what?
A grave, their father's grave.

Tears weep them home,
Wellsprings of tears
Self-nourishing, unchecked,
That tear the heart.
Weep your tears,
Lay waste your heart in tears
For the princes dead.

Speak them this epitaph:
For their citizens,
For rank upon rank of enemies
They played the trick of death.

Ill-starred their mother,
Ill-starred above
All mothers of mortals.
For husband her own son she took;
She bore these sons;
Now they are dead, killed
Each by his own brother's hand.

Brothers sown of one seed,
Dead of one death;
Sharp-edged they lived,
Mad for jealousy they died.

Their quarrel's done;
Their blood runs common in the dust;

True brothers now they are.
A judge came from the East,
Sharp-glittering, born of fire:
Iron, their arbiter. And Ares came
To divide their spoils, their inheritance,
Impartial Ares, hard in his hand
Their father's curse.

Fate's dice are thrown;
Grievous their luck from God.
Rich earth is theirs,
Unfathomed riches of the grave.

See! Gardens of grief you sowed,
Flowers of misery for all your race.
Final victory, shrieks of joy, belong
To the Curses who won the day.
Scattered, scattered your race;
Over that gate, your battleground,
Flutter flags of doom;
Your demon struck you down,
Both down – and now he rests.

ANTIGONE.[24]
You were struck; you struck.

ISMENE.
You killed; you were killed.

ANTIGONE.
With spear you killed.

ISMENE.
With spear you died.

ANTIGONE.
Grief you gave.

ISMENE.
You were given grief.

ANTIGONE.
Fall sigh.

ISMENE.
Fall tear.

ANTIGONE.
Slayer.

ISMENE.
Slain.

ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE.
Ee-ay, ee-ay.

ANTIGONE.
Mind reels with grief.

ISMENE.
Tears tear the heart.

ANTIGONE.
Brother of sorrow.

ISMENE.
Brother of grief.

ANTIGONE.
Your loved one you killed.

ISMENE.
By your loved one killed. 970

ANTIGONE.
Two to tell.

ISMENE.
Two to see.

ANTIGONE.
Sorrow on sorrow laid.

ISMENE.
Brother with brother dead.

CHORUS LEADER.
Destiny, grief-giver,
Shadow of Oedipus,
Black Fury,
Great is your power.

ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE.
Ee-ay, ee-ay.

ANTIGONE.
Bitter pain; eyes flinch.

ISMENE.
The exile home.

ANTIGONE.
He killed; he came not home.

ISMENE.
Home he came, and panted death.

ANTIGONE.
He died.

ISMENE.
He killed.

ANTIGONE.
Death to see.

ISMENE.
Death to tell.

ANTIGONE.
Death brothered in death.

ISMENE.
Brimming, fluttering pain.

CHORUS-LEADER.
Destiny, grief-giver,
Shadow of Oedipus,
Black Fury,
Great is your power.

ANTIGONE.
In suffering you learned.

ISMENE.
You learned, you suffered too.

ANTIGONE.
When you came home to Thebes.

ISMENE.
To challenge him with the spear.

ANTIGONE.
House of grief.

ISMENE.
Unhoused in grief.

ANTIGONE.
Yoh misery.

ISMENE.
Yoh suffering.

ANTIGONE.
For the house.

ISMENE.
For Thebes.

ANTIGONE.
For me.

ISMENE.
For me.

ANTIGONE.
Eteocles, prince of grief.

ISMENE.
Polynices, most racked of men. 1000

ANTIGONE.
God-haunted, blind you were.

ISMENE.
Where shall we bury them?

ANTIGONE.
Where honour lies.

ISMENE.
Bedfellows of their father's pain.

Enter HERALD.[25]

HERALD.
I am to announce the decision and decree
Of the counsellors of Thebes. In recognition

Of his loyalty, his patriotism,
Eteocles is granted burial here
In the earth he loved. For Thebes he died,
Fighting Thebes' enemies. To our ancestral gods
He is without sin or guilt. He died
As young men ought, where honour is.
So stands the decision concerning him.
As for his brother Polynices, his corpse
Is to lie unburied, for dogs to tear.
A fitting end. He'd have toppled Thebes,
But the gods stopped him in his brother's spear.
He's dead; his guilt lives on,
His scorn for our gods.
Foreigners he led against his town.
Scorn and shame are his, well earned;
His grave a vulture's craw. For him
No high-heaped tomb, no funeral dirge,
No ritual of death from next of kin.
So decree the counsellors of Thebes.

ANTIGONE.

Take them this answer, the counsellors.
If no one else will help,
I'll bury him alone, take the risk alone.
My brother! Should I blush
At this rebellion, this disobedience?
Fearful bonds we have:
Our mother's misery, our father's guilt.
His choices are over; now I make my choice –
I stand by him now, living with dead.
No hollow-bellied wolf will tear his flesh,
Decree or no decree. Woman I am,
And woman I'll contrive his grave.
In my rich gown I'll carry earth for him;
I'll cover him; no decree shall turn me back.
I'll do it, never fear. I'll find a way.

HERALD.

I warn you, don't disobey the state.

ANTIGONE.

Don't waste your words.

HERALD.
The people's mood is harsh now danger's past.

ANTIGONE.
Harsh let them be: I mean to bury him.

HERALD.
An outcast! You'll show him such respect?

ANTIGONE.
Did not the gods respect him once?

HERALD.
Before he threatened Thebes.

ANTIGONE.
Ill-treated, he paid ill-treatment back.

HERALD.
No private quarrel! He threatened us all.

ANTIGONE.
Ruin, last of gods, now ends the tale.
I'll bury my brother. Have done with words.

HERALD.
Do as you will. But stand warned by me.

Exit.

CHORUS.
High-necked Furies, demons of death
That haunt this house,
Root out the house of Oedipus,
What can we do?
What act? What punishment?
How can we bear it?
How not weep for you,
Not lay you in the grave?
I'm afraid, I shrink
From the people's rage.
Many you'll find to mourn,
Eteocles; but he must go alone,
Unmourned, save by his sister's tears.

Who could consent to that?

In two separate groups.

Let the state do what it will
To those who mourn for him.
We'll go in procession now
And bury him. This sorrow strikes
All Thebes – and what the state calls just
Shifts, changes from day to day.

With Eteocles now we go,
By justice and state approved.
With the blessed gods, with Zeus
He took the helm, saved us
From drowning in that foreign flood,
Steered us clear of death.

Exeunt.